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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Planning for the Library's Future

[Disclaimer: *The information in this handbook is not legal advice. We recommend that you consult an attorney if you have any questions about how the laws apply to your library.*]

The Importance of Planning: Why Plan?

How often do you leave for the grocery store without a list and come back with dozens of items you didn't need, but without the one or two things you absolutely needed? The library board or director that refuses to plan is like the shopper going to the store without a shopping list. The library may well be offering dozens of services that are not really needed by the community, while failing to offer the one or two services that might provide a great benefit. Yet, it is often hard to convince library directors and library boards to create a long-range plan. The most frequent excuse is "We don't have time" or "We are too busy getting our work done."

Planning for libraries is a process of envisioning the future of the community and the library's place in helping the community achieve that vision. Planning helps the staff and board understand the situation of their community, set priorities, and establish methods for achieving those priorities. The planning document provides a record of the decisions made during that process. The document also becomes a guide for decision-making and action by staff and the board.

Planning Essentials—Getting Started

Size doesn't matter. Every library needs a plan, no matter how small or how large the library and community may be. However, just as a shopping list will be different for the single person and the family of ten, the process followed to create a plan will depend on the size of library and community involved in the project. Large and even many medium-sized libraries, or those libraries accustomed to planning, may have the resources and experience to undertake a full-blown process such as that described in *Strategic Planning for Results* provides a blueprint for creating a vision of the future for a library and its

community, along with a blueprint for creating the services that will enable a library to achieve its vision. *Strategic Planning for Results*, because it is so thorough, describes a fairly time-intensive process involving a large cast of players.

Any library, including smaller libraries or those new to planning, will benefit from undertaking the process outlined in *Strategic Planning for Results* if its board and staff have the commitment, time, and resources to follow through. However, for novice planners, the process is less important than the fact that planning is carried out. First-time planners often want to follow a simplified process that is less time-intensive. Even a simplified process will help the board and staff gain vital information about the library and community, as well as the experience and confidence needed to expand the process during the next planning cycle.

Who should be involved?

The minimum number needed to draft a long-range plan is one. However, just as the grocery shopper benefits from consulting household members before leaving for the store, the long-range plan for the library benefits from input from multiple individuals.

By talking to other stakeholders, library planners can add to the strength and reliability of their plan as well as obtain buy-in from the public. There is an endless list of individuals and groups that might be consulted as part of a basic planning process. Which ones you choose will depend on your particular situation. Suggested players include:

- The mayor, town manager or select board or city council (or equivalent)
- Municipal employees such as an economic development director, senior center director, or recreation department director
- Representatives from the PTA and/or teachers union
- Representatives of active service groups such as Elks, Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions
- Representatives of other social/service organizations such as those representing growing minority populations
- Representatives of the religious community
- Current library users
- Those not currently using the library

You get the picture. The more people you talk to about the community, the more information you will have to create your long-range plan.

How do you gather information?

Probably the most common mistake library planners make when consulting the community in preparation for a long-range plan is to ask people about the library. Neophyte planners ask what library services people are looking for. The real purpose of consulting all of these community representatives is to find out about them—what they are doing and what is important in their lives and work.

The library staff and board are the experts in the broad array of possible library services. It is up to the experts to be creative in proposing new services or changes in services to meet emerging community needs. The mayor and city council may be interested in developing tourism in a community, but they may never think of the library as a vehicle for collecting and disseminating local information of interest to tourists. If you ask someone what the library should be like, they will answer based on their preconceptions about what a library is. Instead, inquire about community needs and then apply library resources to fashion the services to help the community fill those needs.

There are a variety of ways to ask this large array of players about community needs. One of the simplest but most effective is simply to invite them to the library or a neutral site and talk to them. Find someone who is experienced in conducting focus group interviews. Construct one or more groups built around particular interests, such as the needs of children in the community or the needs of immigrants. Assist the interviewer in eliciting the opinions of interested parties regarding what is important to them. Use the Community Conversation worksheet at the end of this chapter as a guide for developing questions.

Library planners often gather information by means of surveys. If you decide to use a survey, consider the following:

- What is the specific question you are trying to answer? What hypothesis are you testing?
- Don't ask questions simply for the sake of asking. If you ask whether the respondent went to college, for example, how will having the information affect your investigation? How will you use the information?

- Will your survey reach the target audience? Surveys done in the library are useless for learning the needs and opinions of nonusers. Current library users do not necessarily represent a cross section of the community.
- How will your survey be distributed?
- How will your survey be tabulated?
- Do a pretest. Make sure that your respondents have the same understanding of the questions you do.

Again, consider enlisting the help of someone experienced in writing and conducting surveys before you get started. This doesn't have to cost anything. You may find a volunteer at a local chamber of commerce or a nearby university, or a local resident may be willing to help who has conducted surveys as part of his or her business. The Maine State Library website has sample surveys available to get you started (see additional resources at the end of this chapter). If you write your own survey, at the very least have someone critique it for you. A poorly executed survey can have less value than no survey at all. It may even lead you to opposite conclusions from those you might have reached otherwise.

One of the easiest ways to gather information about your community is to look at existing sources such as the US Census for demographic information. Often, the abstract or introduction of the town's comprehensive plan will have clues about the community's aspirations for the future.

At the same time, the director and staff can gather facts about the library, including:

- What services are currently being offered?
- How have usage patterns been changing in the past few years?
- What is the composition of the collection? How many books does the library own? How many audiobooks? DVDs? eBooks? Children's books, etc.
- What is the age of the collection? What is the average publication date for each section of the nonfiction collection?

By discussing these and similar facts about the library and the community, the staff and board can come to some basic conclusions about the library on which to plan future services. A library with a small large-print collection in a community with a stable, aging population may want to buy more large-print books, for example. A

science collection with relatively few titles less than one or two years old probably needs updating.

One of the best ways to gather insight regarding your library is to see how it stacks up against current state standards for libraries. The director can also use the Public Library Annual Report statistics to compare your library's performance with a peer group of libraries.

A Plan Outline

Okay, you've gathered all your information. What do you do with it? A simple plan might be organized like this:

Introduction: Discuss the planning process: Who are you? What are your library and community like? How did you find this out? Who did you consult? How did you consult them? What did you find?

Mission Statement: What vision of the community are you are trying to support? What is the library's role in supporting that vision? What is the reason the library exists? (See Sources of Additional Information below for information about developing a mission statement.)

Service Responses: What are the specific services you will offer and why? Service responses are services typically offered by libraries such as basic literacy or lifelong learning. For a more thorough discussion, see Nelson, page 61-88. The list of possible service responses is included at the end of this chapter.

Goals: Once you've identified 4-5 service responses to concentrate on, the next step is to identify goals. These are the outcomes your target groups will receive as a result of your programs or services (the focus is on the community, NOT the library), e.g. If the service response is "Basic Literacy", then a goal might be "Children will develop a love of reading."

Strategies/Objectives: These outline the ways that the library will implement the goals, e.g. summer reading programs, pre-school storytimes, infant lap-sit programs.

Activities: Activities are the specific actions taken to achieve the strategies / objectives, e.g. contact schools, get SRP manual, get craft supplies, find speakers, find sponsors for prizes, etc.

Evaluation: How will you measure the impact these services are having on the target population? How do you know if you are doing it right? What are your alternatives if you are not?

The specific time frame your plan should cover will depend on how ambitious your plan is, or how many activities you hope to carry out. There is no magic formula that dictates that your plan should last five years, three years, or even one year. Do what makes sense for your library and your community. The most important thing you can do is to be adaptive. Follow your plan and revisit it along the way. Make sure it is taking you where you want to go and revise it as necessary. At the end of the planning cycle, when all evaluations are in, start over. Create a new plan and perhaps go a little farther in your information-gathering process.

Special Types of Planning

In addition to general long-range planning for the entire library, you may also want to consider planning projects focusing on special issues such as technology or disaster preparedness.

Even though the E-Rate process no longer requires a technology plan, it is still important that all libraries be involved in some type of technology planning because new technologies can greatly expand the services and resources offered by a library. At the very least, a hardware and software replacement plan is critical for budgeting for the replacement of old or inadequate equipment. Most libraries in Maine receive their Internet connection through the Maine School and Library Network (MSLN). This connection is worth a minimum \$6,100 per year. In order to qualify for this connection, a library must have an Internet Safety Policy and a Computer Use Policy as well as be a member in good standing with the Maine Regional Library System.

Most libraries will rarely experience a severe emergency or natural disaster, but it is best to be prepared, just in case. Fires, floods, extreme weather, and hazardous material accidents can endanger lives, and it is important for libraries to have plans and/or policies in place for dealing with these types of emergencies. It is also important for staff to be trained to handle emergencies properly, including medical emergencies.

Plans and/or policies can also be established to prepare for recovery of library materials after an accident or disaster. The Maine State Library has links to examples of emergency and disaster policies (www.maine.gov/msl/libs/admin/policies/disaster.htm) See below for resources to help with accident and disaster preparedness planning.

Sources of Additional Information

- Your Regional Liaison
<https://www.maine.gov/msl/libs/districts/index.shtml>
- Maine Public Library Standards, available
<https://www.maine.gov/msl/libs/standards/index.shtml>
- Nelson, Sandra. *Strategic Planning for Results*. Chicago, IL: ALA, 2008.
- “Disaster Preparedness and Recovery.” American Library Association
www.ala.org/advocacy/govinfo/disasterpreparedness
- Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC)
www.nedcc.org/
- Conservation OnLine (CoOL), Disaster Preparedness and Response <http://cool.conservation-us.org/>
- Library Service Responses (from *The New Planning for Results: A Streamlined Approach*. Sandra Nelson, Chicago, American Library Association, 2001.) (attached)
- Community Conversation (attached)



Sample Library Service Responses

from *The New Planning for Results*, 2008 ed., pg. 65

Basic literacy - addresses the need to read and to perform other essential daily tasks

Business and Career Information - addresses a need for information related to business, careers, work, entrepreneurship, personal finances, and obtaining employment

Commons - addresses the need of people to meet and interact with others in their community and to participate in public discourse about community issues

Community Referral - addresses the need for information related to services provided by community agencies and organizations

Consumer Information - helps to satisfy the need for information to make informed consumer decisions and to help residents become more self-sufficient

Cultural Awareness - helps satisfy the desire of community residents to gain an understanding of their own cultural heritage and the cultural heritage of others

Current Topics and Titles - helps to fulfill community residents' appetite for information about popular cultural and social trends and their desire for satisfying recreational experiences

Formal Learning Support - helps students who are enrolled in a formal program of education or who are pursuing their education through a program of homeschooling to attain their educational goals

General Information - helps meet the need for information and answers to questions on a broad array of topics related to work, school, and personal life

Government Information - helps satisfy the need for information about elected officials and government agencies that enables people to participate in the democratic process

Information Literacy - helps address the need for skills related to finding, evaluating, and using information effectively

Lifelong Learning - addresses the desire for self-directed personal growth and development opportunities

Local History and Genealogy - addresses the desire of community residents to know and better understand personal or community heritage

Community Conversation

To get a sense of people's aspirations for their community and learn about the kind of community residents want to create, ask the following questions beginning with, "We're trying to learn more about people's aspirations for the community. Would you help by answering five quick questions?"

1. What kind of community do you want to live in?
2. Why is that important to you?
3. How is that different from how you see things now?
4. What are some of the things that need to happen to create that kind of change?
5. What can the library do to help the community reach its goals and aspirations?